Barry Goldwater's Reflections on Radio

By Deborah K. Howe

Senator Barry Goldwater told me the other day that he was probably the oldest ham alive. That may be a slight exaggeration, but at the age of 87 he is certainly a contender for the title. Just consider that he was building radios before vacuum tubes found their way into the common man's shack.

Nonetheless, I like to think of the Senator as at least *the most famous ham*. After all, what other amateur radio operator has been intimate with five U.S. presidents? He was so close that on his advice one of them resigned his office.

In the past, Goldwater's radios have been a conduit for presidential conversation. On one occasion, President Reagan contacted him while the senator was piloting himself over his home state of Arizona. "Whenever I fly I talk," Goldwater told me. "Heck, that's how I learned Sandy O'Connor [a former Arizona state senator and the first woman appointed to the U.S.Supreme Court] was put on the Supreme Court. I was flying right there at 45,000 feet," the senator said as he pointed up into the crisp desert air outside his living room window, "and I got a call from Washington: 'The President wants to talk to you.' They gave me a frequency and I tuned it in. I called for the President and back he came. He says, 'I thought you ought to be the first one to know. I appointed Sandy O'Connor to the Supreme Court.' 'Well', I said, 'that's wonderful because I'm in spitting range of my town. I'm right over the middle of Phoenix.'"

Did this conversation take place on an unclassified frequency? You bet it did. Short wave listeners who may have been scanning the bands and happened upon this extraordinary QSO would have scooped Dan Rather on this momentous occasion.

Besides talking when he flies, the senator enjoys scanning air traffic. "I can sit there and listen to the aircraft ... their conversations when they take off and land. I listen to the fighter pilots going out of Luke."

The antenna atop Senator Goldwater's shack.

"I've had hobbies all my life. In fact, it's hard to find something I haven't done. I've kept busy...flying for thousands of hours, reading every kind of book, building hundreds of model planes and ships, tinkering with different cars, taking thousands of photographs and developing them, talking on my ham radio, camping, hiking, and canoeing across the west, assembling one new gadget after another, writing many letters, collecting and playing hundreds of Dixieland jazz records, swimming, and now soaking in the hot tub."

What's Boredom?

Another title for which the senator is a contender is *the man with the most hobbies.*

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He labels himself a *weather nut*, his interest in atmospheric conditions having been sparked decades ago. "I had a [see saw] when I was a Boy Scout. It's a tricky little gadget. There are two buckets and if there's no rain they're perfectly balanced. When there's a rainfall, one drop will fall down and hit this side of the bucket, and when there are enough raindrops in that side of the bucket, it tilts, and when it tilts it closes the circuit and tells the instrument there is 1/10 of an inch. Now, when the other side gets enough water, it goes down, so it tells you another story. I used to go crazy sitting there watching it."

Today, in the corner of his living room, next to a window that overlooks a desert studded with the kind of cactus that only grows within hailing distance of the Mexican border, a Rain Bird digitally reports the weather. With the turn of a big black knob, one can read the outside temperature, inside temperature, barometric pressure, wind speed and direction, and the rainfall. Watching the rainfall in Phoenix?! Even the senator admits, "Well, with the weather here, you're wasting a lot of time. But we get storms and then it gets interesting." But most days the see saw remains in perfect balance.

Ham radio is the hobby that has held the senator's interest the longest. "I started when I was about thirteen years old and I've kept at it. I've been at it ever since the age of spark coil and a crystal set to receive. On a real good night I could hear Los Angeles, but not very good. Then the vacuum tube did away with the crystal sets for receiving. The trouble with the vacuum tubes—they were quite a bit of money in those days. I think it was about a dollar a watt. So I picked cotton one summer and made enough money to buy a ten watt tube. In those days it was very easy to make the tube receiver, but nowadays they're so complicated—black boxes with secret circuitry."

Putting His Hobby to Work

Amateur radio is a pastime the senator has put to good use. During the Vietnam war he had a radio station through which he ran 300,000 phone patches connecting servicemen and women with family and friends back home.

Under different, more benevolent circumstances, the senator happened upon a call for help. "Yes, I think I saved a couple off Ensenada. I heard them one day sending a May Day—a May Day is an SOS. So I called them on the frequency they were on. I said, 'What's your trouble?' They said, 'We don't know where we are.' 'What's your last point of knowledge?'" he asked.

With the little information they could give him, he got out his map, and sent out an emergency May Day to the Coast Guard to whom he relayed the information. "'I don't know exactly where this ship is, but he's in trouble. It's a sail boat with not much wind and no power.' And by God, that Coast Guard found them and brought them into port. I've had several cases. Out there on the water, you know, you're out there all by yourself."

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When I mentioned to the Senator that there are people who believe in sailing without radios (they call themselves purists), he responded in his traditionally blunt style: "Oh, I think they're out of their heads."

Brought up on Broadcasting

Also to his credit, while in high school the senator helped build the first radio station in Phoenix, KFAD, now known as KTAR. The senator used to hang around the site. "I'd sweep the place out, picked up all the dirt, and they finally got to building this [250 watt] transmitter for the first broadcast station and they let me help build it. I could pour the solder. And I don't even have a picture of that." When KFAD first began, the radio station mostly played records: "They hadn't developed any talent."

The mention of talent opened up a whole new arena of questioning: the senator's view on the development and evolution of talent in an era when *shock jocks* can be heard in every city. I asked if he knew of Howard Stern (the syndicated king of shock jocks).

"Yeah, and the guy that's on the Republican ... Rush Limbaugh. I see nothing wrong with that as long as they don't go into talking about classified material. Now if a fellow started talking about some of the performance statistics of the F-14 and F-15, I would say that was wrong and I would report him. There are some, though ... we've got one or two around this state...who sort of preach doing harm to other people. And the answer is, they have the right. When you talk about free speech, it's hard to get around. I think people have to be careful." Liberal words from the conscience of the conservatives.

On the other hand, in regard to government funding of public radio, he feels that there should be some control.

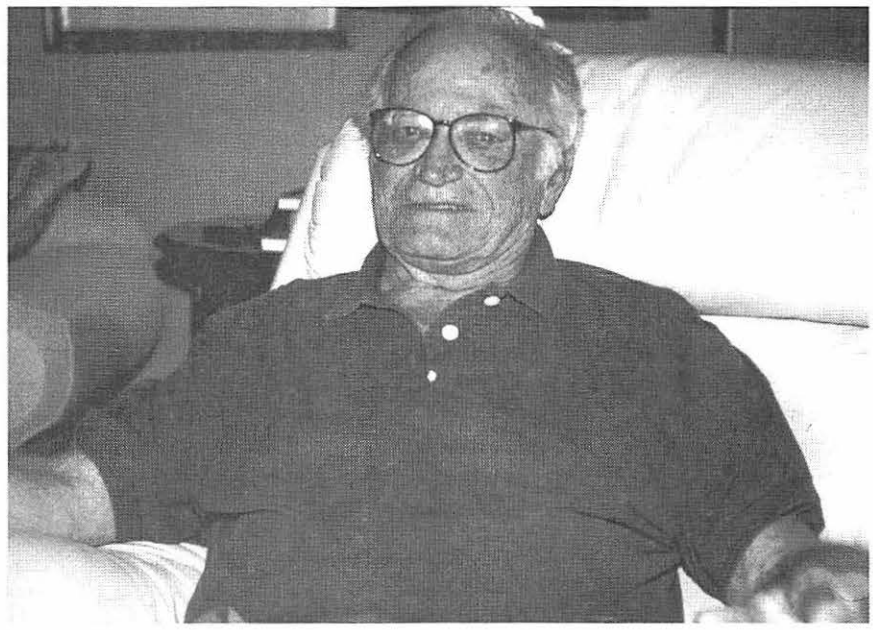
"Now, if you want to look at the whole subject of public broadcasting, there's parts of it that are so bad that you can say, 'Let's do away with the whole thing.' But I would rather say, 'Let's get the offenders and clean them up.' I say that because in Arizona we have, I think, the finest public broadcasting station there is over at Arizona State College. They do a good job."

And his view on radio in general? "Well, I think the broadcast industry has been a great asset to America. I think of people being able to sit in their living rooms listening to performances, and the whole subject of radio has made living better."

K7UGA on the Air

Born into a new millennium during a time when Marconi was still developing communication by radio waves, the senator didn't hesitate to jump feet first into the twentieth century. He easily made the leap from homemade cat-hair-whiskers and dainty-crystal receiving sets to integrated circuitry by Kenwood. The senator admits that "It's kind of fun talking to people," and can still be heard on the ham bands under the call sign K7UGA.

His favorite band is twenty meters, mostly because he labels himself a "lazy kind of guy"—he doesn't like to retune. "But I use everything from 80 to 10 meters, and now I use 2 meters and 6 meters, and any oddball frequency that comes along." So if you hear someone identify himself as Bravo Alpha Romeo Romeo Yankee, it just might be *the most famous ham* looking for a good ragchew.



America's most famous ham, K7UGA, would rather be pursuing one of his many hobbies than posing for the author's photo. Senator Goldwater has been interested in radio since he was thirteen.